

At Risk Group: Homeless Young People

This document aims to outline some of the facts about homelessness in young people and present some of the links to mental health issues in this group.

Introduction

A person is considered homeless* when they do not have suitable accommodation alternatives and their current living arrangement:

- is in a location that is inadequate or
- is short-term without the possibility of extension
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to, space for social relations

*definition adapted from the Australian Bureau of Statistics

How many young people are homeless?

Homelessness is difficult to adequately measure and it is likely to be underestimated. Best estimates suggest that over 32,000 people aged 12-24 are homeless in Australia, representing 1/3 of the country's total homeless population.

Youth homelessness is unseen

Most homeless young people don't live on the street - They may be *couch surfing* or sleeping on floors, temporarily staying with friends, relatives, family and sometimes complete strangers, until they outstay their welcome and move on.

Common causes of homelessness

The reasons for homelessness among young Australians are many and diverse, and include:

- Experiencing abuse
- Neglect
- Addiction
- Trauma
- Mental illness
- Domestic or family violence.

Link between homelessness and mental health issues in YP

Homelessness in young people is strongly associated with mental and physical health concerns. 48 -82% of homeless young people have a diagnosable mental illness (including mood, anxiety, substance use and trauma-related disorders). Homelessness is a risk factor for mental and physical ill-health and mental illness is a risk factor for homelessness.

Young people experiencing homelessness are more likely to experience:

- Psychological distress
- Psychiatric disorders
- Alcohol and drug misuse
- Self-harm and suicidal behaviour
- Inadequate nutrition
- Limited access to medical care
- Unsafe sexual encounters
- Violence

These risks increase with duration of homelessness.

Despite increased incidence of mental health issues, young people experiencing homelessness are less likely to access mental health services and more likely to disengage with education and employment.

What are the early signs suggesting a possible mental health problem?

Things to look out for include:

Changes in mood – feeling sadder, more anxious or more irritable

Changes in behaviour – being less talkative, becoming withdrawn or being more aggressive

Changes in relationships – falling out with friends or your partner, or conflict with family

Changes in appetite – eating too much or too little, or losing or gaining weight without trying to

Changes in sleep patterns – not sleeping enough, or sleeping too much

Changes in coping – feeling overwhelmed or tired of life

Changes in thinking – more negative thoughts or thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

Supporting a young person

As a priority, ensure the young person's basic needs are met by supporting them to engage with appropriate services (e.g. housing support, Centrelink). Normalise their mental health difficulties in the context of their situation and encourage them to seek professional help for their mental health, their GP is a good place to start. In addition, remind them that there are a number of things they can do to look after themselves::

- Eat well
- Get enough sleep
- Spend time with people they trust
- Talk to people about their situation
- Exercise
- Avoid using alcohol and other drugs
- Find time for enjoyable activities in their day
- Get help if things aren't improving

Homelessness and suicide

One in ten homeless young people report having suicidal behaviour in the past three months, and 28 percent of those had not told anyone.

Getting help

If the young person needs urgent help or are in danger, call 000 immediately.

If they are experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness, contact your local services (<http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/index.php/about-homelessness/are-you-homeless>)

If they are experiencing mental health issues relating to homelessness, headspace may be able to help.

More information

For more information, visit Homelessness Australia at <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/>

References

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Information paper: A statistical definition of homelessness. ABS Cat. No. 4922.0.* 2012, Australian Bureau of Statistics: Canberra
2. headspace Service Improvement Project Component 2: Social Inclusion Model Development Study (2015)
3. headspace Position paper – Homelessness